

**Concert review: Toy Piano Composers' new works effectively reflect the visual in the musical**

BY MARGARET LAM ON FEBRUARY 3, 2013 · ADD COMMENT

How do you convey the feeling triggered by a work of art? Through words? Through making art of your own? The Toy Piano Composers did it through music in Saturday night's "Artistic Differences" at Heliconian Hall.

Here was a concert representing the work of a new generation of composers who make not only new music, but also work on new ways of connecting with their audience.

The programme opened with Monica Pearce's *In the forest, glow*, written for a trio of bass clarinet, piano and percussion, featuring Anthony Thompson, Wesley Shen, and Daniel Morphy respectively.

This meditative piece echoed the almost mystical and otherworldly character of the illustration by Brandon James Scott, painting the sound of leaves crushed under an animal's feet through clever use of dry greens in a clay pot. The image of a vast living forest was brought to musical life through Pearce's carefully crafted timing, which created natural pauses and organic ebb and flow.

Christian Floisand found inspiration in fan art for a game called *Swords & Sworcery*, created by Sylvain Coutouly, who works as an artist for the game.

Game music is often atmospheric, delineating a space and also a mood that the gamer should be in. Sharon Lee joined the ensemble on violin, and an amped acoustic guitar was "played" by striking it with two pencils.

The mood of Floisand's *Sylvan Sworcery* was mysterious, depicting an unusual world where quests are fulfilled, and puzzles are solved, with faint echos of familiar melodic lines and rhythmic patterns fading in and out.

It was a joy to try and identify the musical influences in *Get in Line*, a piece by Glenn James, an out-of-town TPC member based in Vancouver.

Finding an affinity with the creative process of visual artist Zoë Cilliers, her work "His Teeth Grew So Long" was shown on stage while Katherine Watson and Alex Kotyk joined the rest of the ensemble on flute and double bass.

This high energy piece gave distinct musical characteristics to each instrument, but in different combinations with each other they created all kinds of wonderful sonic qualities. This piece really showcased the ensemble in their ability to *perform* the music, not merely transmit the notes on the score.

After the intermission, Fiona Ryan whimsically and playfully explored the connection between humans and nature in "Strange Gazes and Birdsongs," inspired by a painting

by Kate Domina.

The namesake toy piano (not always featured in their concerts) and a childlike rhythm drew us into a world of young innocence — exploring, playing, discovering, experimenting.

Patrick Murray, a guest composer, was commissioned to write “Skin and Bones” based on a large-scale painting called “The Light Keepers II” by Ognian Zekoff. The artwork had made a great impression on him at the Distillery District’s Thompson Landry Gallery.

Murray’s was the most experimental piece that on the program. It was also one of the most effective at conveying musically the ephemeral feelings inspired by visual art. This piece was tightly constructed, effectively using all kinds of extended techniques.

To conclude the evening was Chris Thornborrow’s “Walking,” inspired by a short animated film from 1969 by Ryan Larkin.

The National Film Board classic helped set the visual tone. It’s always difficult to describe new music and do it much justice, but the one common element between the animation and the piece was its exploring of different types of walking.

Complex layering and interplay of rhythms mirrored the layers of moving silhouettes on screen. There were many hints of the familiar, but just as you started expecting the music to go a certain way, it transformed into something new and contemporary.

There was a subtle playfulness and also great care in balancing all the instruments and making the musical lines distinct and clear. With Murray conducting, the ensemble finished the evening with a commendable performance.

As mentioned by Murray and Thornborrow during the concert, writing music inspired by art is a process of empathizing with “the other” — whether that is the artist, the subject, or anything else. It means digging deep and stepping outside of your comfort zone.

Doing something different is scary; you open yourself to criticism, you create opportunities for mistakes (such as the big crash on the crowded stage as they transitioned between the last two pieces).

There is a resilient and fun-loving spirit that the Toy Piano Composers draw out in not only each other, but also in the audiences and guest artists they connect with. We are lucky to have such enterprising young composers amongst us.

*Margaret Lam*